

a spring playscape project

Building a tree circle

by Rusty Keeler

If you are dreaming of adding nature to your yard, this project may be perfect for you. The Tree Circle is a green gathering area for children made by planting trees in a circle. For children, the Tree Circle becomes a magical place for dramatic play, quiet retreat, or lively nature exploration. For teachers and parents it becomes a shady grove for snacks and stories. The trees create a sweet spot that changes during the seasons and grows over time. A beautiful addition to a child's life — and yours too!

To begin, put together a 'beautification team' of excited volunteers wanting to help. Do you know people who have knowledge about plants or have planted trees before? Got any friends or staff with a green thumb (and a strong back!)? This team will be the folks who make design decisions, select the trees, and plant the trees. Local plant nurseries, landscapers, and landscape architects can answer questions or offer

advice. They may even donate some time or trees if you ask nicely.

Here are the basic steps:

Decide where to plant the Tree Circle — Think about sunlight and where you want shade. Make sure to pick a spot where your trees will have room to grow. Ask your team to help you decide.

Select what kind of trees — Dwarf fruit trees and smaller ornamental trees stay more 'child-sized' as they grow and will have beautiful flowers in springtime. Evergreen trees create a tree circle with a whole different set of sensory experiences. Plant native trees that are indigenous to your area.

Decide on size — Think of the Tree Circle as a room. How many children do you want to fit inside? What kinds of play activities do you want to have room for in this outside room? Create a space that feels cozy, but also gives the treetops room to grow together. The Tree Circle may someday look like a living gazebo when the shady treetops grow together!

Decide on number of trees — When you know the size and shape, sprinkle flour on the ground in the shape of your circle to help you visualize the new space. How many trees will fit around your circle?

Depending on the size, some tree circles can have six or eight trees; others may have only three or four trees. Any number is fine. Be sure to leave a space open with no trees on one side to create a fun entrance. Which way should it face?

Imagine benches and ground cover — Use whatever resources and materials you have available. Benches can be made from objects such as straw bales, tree stumps, whole logs, smooth boulders, and so on. The ground cover inside the Tree Circle can be grassy or covered with wood chips. Think about the mood and sensory experiences you want to create inside the space.

Get your trees — Does anyone on your team know a landscape person or someone who works at a plant nursery? They can help you get your trees. They will also be able to tell you the best way to plant and maintain the trees. Ask for discounts or free delivery (send a thank you note afterwards!).

Plant your trees — Planting the tree circle can probably happen on a weekend afternoon with a small team of workers armed with shovels and smiles. Pick a day on the calendar, invite anybody who wants to help, arrange to have the trees delivered, and you are on your way! (Remember to provide snacks and drinks for volunteers.) With more flour on the ground, mark out



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where each tree should go and start your volunteers digging! Follow the nursery-person's directions on how deep the trees should be planted and be sure to clip off any low 'poking' branches. When all the trees are in the ground be sure to have everybody sit inside for a picture!

Install extras — Bring in your ground cover material and benches. Add things like wind chimes, birdhouses, or bird-feeders for added fun and discovery.

The trees in your tree circle are living beings that grow and change over time. Like children, they need love and care.

With the right gentle attention, your tree circle will mature into a beautiful natural space for your children.

What a great place to play!

Please send pictures of your Tree Circle to Rusty@earthplay.net.

